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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAHRAN 000099

SIPDIS

PASS TO NEA/ARP JOSH HARRIS

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TAGS: [SA](#) [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [ENRG](#)
SUBJECT: KING ABDULLAH MAKES AN UNSCHEDULED VISIT TO THE EASTERN PROVINCE

REF: DHAHRAN 46

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CLASSIFIED BY: Joseph A. Kenny, Consul General, EXEC, DOS.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)
[1](#)1. (C) KEY POINTS:

-- King Abdullah made a last minute, unscheduled visit to the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia from April 26 to May 1.

-- During his visit he launched \$14.4 billion worth of projects in Jubail, including the world's largest desalination plant.

-- The King met with King Abdullah II of Jordan and U.S. Special Advisor for the Gulf and Southwest Asia Ambassador Dennis Ross while in the region.

-- Some skeptical members of the business community and the Shi'a leadership described the King's visit as merely a "photo-op."

End key points.

[1](#)2. (SBU) WELCOME TO THE EAST. Normally when the King visits the Eastern Province (EP) he makes the announcement well in advance of his arrival. However, this time he gave only a couple of days notice to his staff and the newspapers only found out the day he arrived in the EP. Despite being home to virtually all of the nation's oil production and a majority of its industrial output, this was only King Abdullah's third visit to the EP since ascending the throne in 2005. Nevertheless, private citizens and companies displayed their appreciation with hastily-converted, giant billboards welcoming the King along the highways and major thoroughfares, as well as full-page advertisements taken out in the local papers to the same effect. One newspaper headline described the King's visit as sparking "jubilation" in the EP.

[1](#)3. (SBU) LAUNCHING BIG TICKET INDUSTRIAL PROJECTS. The King spent one day during his visit at the Jubail Industrial City where he ceremoniously launched several industrial projects

worth \$14.4 billion. Among the big ticket projects was the world's largest combination desalination and power generation plant. This gas-fired power plant will generate 2,750 Megawatts of electricity and the associated desalination plant will produce 800,000 cubic meters of water daily for consumption in the EP. The papers quoted Saudi officials at the launching as saying that the King was showing the world that big investments will go forward in Saudi Arabia despite the global economic downturn.

14. (C) OFFICIAL BUSINESS. Aside from tours of facilities and industrial projects, the King held his Council of Ministers meeting (i.e., cabinet-level meeting) in Dammam. Also, King Abdullah II of Jordan and a delegation headed by U.S. Special Advisor Ambassador Dennis Ross held official meetings with the Saudi monarch. (Note: Results of the meeting between Ambassador Ross, the King and other high level Saudi officials follow septel. End note.) Post contacts were hard-pressed to remember when there were so many high-level Saudi officials in the EP at the same time. A contact in the governor of the EP's office noted that the governor, Prince Mohammed bin Fahd (MbF), was due to depart the Kingdom for vacation in the South of France when he got the call that the King was coming to visit. MbF is notorious for spending months out of the year abroad and one well-connected businessman thinks that the spontaneity of the visit might have been meant to send a message to MbF that he should spend more time in the Kingdom.

15. (C) QUIET CRITICISM OF THE KING'S VIST. On separate occasions, both prominent Sunni businessmen and influential Shi'a interlocutors told PolOff that the King's visit was nothing more than a "photo-op." The businessmen are concerned about the Saudi economy and their confidence has been shaken by the frequent news reports of project delays and still hard-to-find cash. They were hoping that the King would call on

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the large merchant families to listen to their concerns directly. As for the Shi'a, a number of their religious leaders requested a private meeting with the King through governor MbF's office. According to a long-time Shi'a contact, MbF told them that if they made a public statement condemning the controversial Shi'a Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr (see ref A for more info on al-Nimr) he would grant the meeting with the King. Instead the Shi'a leaders drafted a statement reiterating their support for the King and his government. They were denied the private meeting.

KENNY